

## Condoleezza Rice's New Book and Walter J. Ong's Thought

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Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's readable new book *Democracy: Stories from the Long Road to Freedom* (New York: Twelve, 2017) is a superficial defense of democracy promotion as part of American foreign policy. But to what extent, if any, should democracy promotion be a key part of American foreign policy?

One way to argue with her superficial defense of democracy promotion is to revisit the thought of the American Jesuit cultural historian and theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955) of Saint Louis University, the Jesuit university in St. Louis, Missouri.

Ong's multivariate account of the infrastructures of our Western cultural history shows how certain key conditions contributed to the historical emergence in print culture 1.0 in Western culture of modern democracy as exemplified in our American experiment in representative democracy. However, many parts of the world today are still not dominated by the cultural conditions of print culture 1.0 that emerged in the West after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the mid-1450s. Instead, many parts of the world today are still dominated by residual forms of oral culture 1.0.

But economic globalization is making inroads in parts of the world today that are still dominated by residual forms of oral culture 1.0, ready or not. However, as Rice notes, a form of democratic government was instituted in India (pp. 397-400), despite residual forms of oral culture 1.0 in India. Consequently, Rice could argue that democracy promotion should also be a key part of American foreign policy in those part of the world today, ready or not.

But Ong's thought about the infrastructures of our Western cultural history deserves to be lionized by people such as Rice who want to get their bearings about our Western cultural history.

Thomas M. Walsh has compiled a complete bibliography of Ong's 400 or so publications, including information about reprinted and translated items: "Walter J. Ong, S.J.: A Bibliography 1929-2006" in *Language, Culture, and Identity: The Legacy of Walter J. Ong, S.J.*, edited by Sara van den Berg and Walsh (New York: Hampton P, 2011, pp. 185-245). However, despite the wide range of Ong's publications, he published only five book-length studies:

- (1) *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1958), Ong's slightly revised Harvard doctoral dissertation;
- (2) *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1967), the expanded version of Ong's 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale University;
- (3) *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1981), Ong's 1979 Messenger Lectures at Cornell University;
- (4) *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), Ong's most widely known book;
- (5) *Hopkins, the Self, and God* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: U of Toronto P, 1986), Ong's 1981 Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto.

In his mature work from the early 1950s onward, Ong worked out a sweeping account of cultural history. His sweeping thesis about cultural history can serve as a conceptual framework for understanding Western cultural history. In the preface to his book *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1977), Ong himself explicitly sets forth at long last his sweeping thesis about cultural history, which he claims is not reductionist:

[My mature works] do not maintain that the evolution from primary orality through writing and print to electronic orality, which produces secondary orality, causes or explains everything in human culture and consciousness. Rather, the thesis is relationist: major developments, and very likely even all major developments, in culture and consciousness are related, often in unexpected intimacy, to the evolution of the word from primary orality to its present state. But the relationships are varied and complex, with cause and effect often difficult to distinguish (pp. 9-10).

Major developments in Western cultural history would include modern science, modern capitalism, modern democracy, the Industrial Revolution, and the Romantic Movement. Ong's relationist approach to cultural studies tends to be phenomenological and personalist in cast. In his mature work, he tends to be irenic in style and tone. Even though he was not uncritical of certain trends in Western cultural history such as racism and sexism and genocide, it would be out of character for him to sound alarmist. But he is characteristically alerting us about the infrastructures of Western cultural history. However, he usually does not frame his presentations as polemics with real or imagined adversaries (or adversarial positions).

Ong aligns the polemic tendency to think in terms of a strong polarity of good-versus-evil with primary orality. Consequently, he tends to avoid expressing hostility in his publications, even when he is making critical statements. But that tendency gives his publications a contemplative aura. In other words, his publications do not sound like calls to action, but calls to contemplation before undertaking to consider possible good courses of action and decision making. As Ong himself explains in *Hopkins, the Self, and God* (pp. 78-81 and 87), Jesuit spirituality trains persons to carefully consider possible good courses of action in the process of decision making. Contemplation before action makes for a contemplative in action.

Nevertheless, in the polemical spirit, I will formulate here the antithesis of Ong's thesis: No, major developments in culture and consciousness are NOT related to the evolution of the word from primary orality through writing and print to electronic orality. But few scholars would advance this antithesis as an alternative to Ong's relationist thesis. Of course, in addition to advancing the antithesis of Ong's thesis, there are numerous other ways in which to disagree with particular points that Ong makes.

Overall, Ong's sweeping relationist thesis may understandably give more timid scholars pause. Scholars are trained to be specialists. Ong himself was a Renaissance specialist. Nevertheless, as a polymath, he tended to situate the particular person and/or work in the panoramic context of the long view of the big picture of the cosmos and culture.

Because Ong himself explicitly describes his sweeping thesis as relationist, we may take a hint from hint and look for scholarly works that can be related to his thought, even if the authors of those works do not happen to advert explicitly to his thought.

Because Ong sees technology as instrumental, a necessary but not a sufficient condition, in the development of the infrastructures of Western cultural history, his explicit attention to the technologizing of the word as a significant variable sets him apart from many other thinkers.

Definition of terms: At times, Ong refers to the cultural constellation that evolved historically in Western culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the 1450s as print culture. In the present essay, I will refer to that historical constellation as print culture 1.0. The interactive impact of what Ong refers to as secondary oral culture (oral culture 2.0), due to communications media that accentuate sound that resonates deeply in the human psyche, print culture 2.0 has emerged in Western culture in recent decades as exemplified by photocopiers and printers attached to computers. For Ong, oral culture 2.0 is not exactly the same as primary oral culture (oral culture 1.0), but is similar to it inasmuch as the communications media that accentuate sound resonate deeply with memory of oral culture 1.0 in the collective unconscious (in C. G. Jung's terminology). Ong operationally defines oral culture 1.0 as pre-literate culture in the sense that it historically came before the invention of phonetic alphabetized literacy. But Ong rejects a cyclic view of time commonly found in oral culture 1.0, and a cyclic view of cultural history, in favor of a linear or evolutionary view.

**Now, Ong discusses cyclic thought and linear (or evolutionary) thought in *Orality and Literacy* (pp. 139-47) and elsewhere. His theme is nicely illustrated in Donald L. Fixico's *The American Indian Mind in a Linear World: American Indian Studies and Traditional Knowledge* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003). Concerning the historical emergence of linearity in Western culture, see Richard Elliott Friedman's *The Hidden Book in the Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998). The classic study of cyclicism versus linearity is Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, translated by Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954). Today there is no shortage of publications in evolutionary theory.**

Now, Ong first adumbrates his sweeping relationist thesis in his massively researched book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason*. In that book, Ong centers his attention on the French logician and educational reformer and Protestant martyr Peter Ramus (1515-1572), whose logic (or dialectic) was the central curriculum not only at Cambridge University in England, but also at Harvard College (founded in 1636) in New England. In that book, Ong works with the aural-visual contrast that he acknowledges (p. 338, note 54) that he borrowed from the

French philosopher Louis Lavelle (1883-1951). In that book about the history of the verbal arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic (or dialectic) in Western cultural history, Ong uses the aural-visual contrast to adumbrate his sweeping relationist thesis. But he subsequently preferred to work with his signature orality-literacy contrast.

Incidentally, Ong's ancestors on his father's side of the family left East Anglia, where Cambridge University is located, on the same ship that brought Roger Williams to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1631.

Now, what Ong refers to in his subtitle as the Art of Reason, is the philosophical stance common in the Age of Reason (also known as the Enlightenment). In what he refers to as the Art of Discourse, the orator or author usually frames his or her discourse as a polemic with real or imagined adversaries (or adversarial positions). But what Ong refers to as the Art of Reason usually does not involve explicitly structuring one's discourse as a polemic with real or imagined adversaries (or adversarial positions).

However, Ong's signature way of proceeding is to work with bipolar contrasts such as the aural-visual contrast or the orality-literacy contrast. In this respect, we could say that the polemic spirit in Ong's thought is inherent in the bipolar contrasts he works with. For further discussion of Ong's philosophical thought, see my essay "Understanding Ong's Philosophical Thought" online:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11299/187434>

Now, in *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, Ong aligns the polemic spirit with oral culture 1.0, and with residual forms of oral culture 1.0 (pp. 192-286). The Greek term "polemos" means war, struggle.

But in *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness*, Ong prefers to use the term agonistic instead. The Greek term "agon" means struggle, contest. By coincidence, Yale's literary critic Harold Bloom published *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982).

The part of the human psyche that Plato and Aristotle refer to as "thumos" (or "thymos") is the driving force of the agonistic psychodynamic that Ong and Bloom describe – and of our flight/fight/freeze response.

**Ong also discusses agonistic structures in *Orality and Literacy* (pp. 43-45 and 69-71). His theme is nicely illustrated in Thomas O. Sloane's *On the Contrary: The Protocol of Traditional Rhetoric* (Washington, DC: Catholic U of America P, 1997). The classic study of agonistic structures is Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949). Today there is no shortage of studies of agonistic tendencies.**

Thus, when Ong works with bipolar contrasts such as aural-visual or orality-literacy, the two bipolar terms represent an agonistic tension. Strictly speaking, he is not engaging in what he himself terms the Art of Discourse. But Ong's way of proceeding to work with contrasts makes his thought a tough act to follow. However, the trajectory of the Canadian literary critic Marshall McLuhan's thought in his experimental but flawed book *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1962) parallels, intersects with, and diverges from Ong's thought in his 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, which McLuhan explicitly refers to more than once (pp. 129 and 159-60). As a young man, McLuhan (1911-1980; Ph.D. in English, Cambridge University, 1943) taught

English at Saint Louis University from 1937 to 1944, during which time Ong was in graduate studies there in philosophy and English as part of his Jesuit training.

**But certain other themes in Ong's *Orality and Literacy* have been studied by other scholars in recent years. For example, the theme of visibility, part of his aural-visual contrast (pp. 117-23), has been studied in the following scholarly works, for example, which can be related to Ong's thought:**

- (1) John DeFrancis' *Visible Speech: The Diverse Oneness of Writing Systems* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1989);
- (2) Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1990);
- (3) Robert Hahn's *Anaximander and the Architects: The Contributions of Egyptian and Greek Architectural Technologies to the Origins of Greek Philosophy* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2001);
- (4) Raymond Adolph Prier's *Thauma Idesthai: Sight and Appearance in Archaic Greek* (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1989);
- (5) Andrea Wilson Nightingale's *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in Its Cultural Context* (New York and Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2004);
- (6) Bernard Lonergan's *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, 5th ed., edited by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: U of Toronto P, 1992);
- (7) Jas Elsner's *Roman Eyes: Visuality & Subjectivity in Art & Text* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2007);
- (8) Marco Mostert's *A Bibliography of Works in Medieval Communication* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2012);
- (9) Johannes Hoff's *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids, MI; and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013);
- (10) David Michael Levin's *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: U of California P, 1999);
- (11) Richard Yeo's *Encyclopaedic Visions: Scientific Dictionaries and Enlightenment Culture* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2001);
- (12) Gary Shapiro's *Archaeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2003).
- (13) Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: U of California P, 1993).

But enough examples of works that can be related to Ong's theme of visibility!

**The theme of orality in Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (pp. 1-76) has been studied in various ways in the following scholarly books, for example, which can be related to Ong's thought:**

- (1) David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Random House, 1996);
- (2) John Miles Foley's *Teaching Oral Traditions* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1998);
- (3) Jeffrey Walker's *Rhetoric and Poetic in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000);
- (4) Mark W. Edwards' *Sound, Sense, and Rhythm: Listening to Greek and Latin Poetry* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2002);
- (5) David Robey's *Sound and Structure in the Divine Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000);
- (6) Adam Fox's *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500-1700* (Oxford: Clarendon P/ Oxford UP, 2000);
- (7) Bruce R. Smith's *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor [of the O-Shape of the Globe Theater in 1599]* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999);
- (8) James I. Wimsatt's *Hopkins's Poetics of Speech Sound: Sprung Rhythm, Lettering, Inscapes* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: U of Toronto P, 2006);
- (9) Gerd Hurm's *Rewriting the Vernacular Mark Twain: The Aesthetics and Politics of Orality in Samuel Clemens's Fiction* (Trier, Germany: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2003);
- (10) Willi Erzgraber's *James Joyce: Oral and Written Discourse as Mirrored in Experimental Narrative Art*, translated by Amy Cole (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002);
- (11) Kathleen E. Welch's *Electric Rhetoric: Classical Rhetoric, Oralism, and a New Literacy* (Cambridge, MA; and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology P, 1999);
- (12) John Miles Foley's *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2012).

But enough examples of works that can be related to Ong's theme of orality!

**The following works amplify and support Ong's discussion of the art of memory in *Orality and Literacy* (pp. 33-36 and 139-55) and elsewhere:**

- (1) Mary J. Carruthers' *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory and Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, UK; and New York: Cambridge UP, 1990);
- (2) Carruthers' *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1998);
- (3) Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski's *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2002);
- (4) Lina Bolzoni's *The Gallery of Memory: Literary and Iconographic Models in the Age of the Printing Press*, translated by Jeremy Parzen (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: U of Toronto P, 2001).

Historically, the art of memory involved the storage and retrieval of information in the living human memory. Today the storage and retrieval of information is greatly increased with the assistance of computers and searchable databases.

But enough examples of works about the art of memory that can be related to Ong's discussion of the art of memory!

**The following works amplify and support Ong's discussion of commonplaces and composing processes in *Orality and Literacy* (pp. 108-12) and elsewhere:**

- (1) Wolfgang Mieder's *International Bibliography of Paremiology and Phraseology*, 2 vols. (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009);
- (2) Mortimer J. Adler's *Syntopicon, Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., Vols. 1 and 2 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1990);
- (3) John Miles Foley's *Homer's Traditional Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999);
- (4) Dennis R. MacDonald's *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2000);
- (5) MacDonald's *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer?: Four Cases from Acts of the Apostles* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2003);
- (6) MacDonald's *The Gospels and Homer: Imitations of Greek Epic in Mark and Luke-Acts* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015);
- (7) MacDonald's *Luke and Vergil: Imitations of Classical Greek Literature* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015);
- (8) MacDonald's *The Dionysian Gospel: The Fourth Gospel and Euripides* (Minneapolis: Fortress P, 2017);
- (9) Keith D. Miller's *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Its Sources* (New York: Free P, 1992);
- (10) Miller's *Martin Luther King's Biblical Epic: His Final, Great Speech* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2012);
- (11) Harvey Cox's *The Market as God* (Cambridge, MA; and London: Harvard UP, 2016).

But enough examples of works about commonplaces and composing processes that can be related to Ong's discussion of commonplaces and composing practices!

**The following works amplify and support Ong's discussion of the inward turn of consciousness in *Orality and Literacy* (pp. 178-79) and elsewhere has also been studied in various ways in the following scholarly works, for example:**

- (1) Bernard Williams' *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: U of California P, 1993);
- (2) Erich Fromm's *You Shall Be As Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966);
- (3) M. David Litwa's *Becoming Divine: An Introduction to Deification in Western Culture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books/ Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013);
- (4) Litwa's *Desiring Divinity: Self-deification in Early Jewish and Christian Mythmaking* (New York: Oxford UP, 2016);

- (5) Litwa's *The Early Christian Depiction of Jesus as a Mediterranean God* (Minneapolis: Fortress P, 2014);
- (6) Litwa's *We Are Being Transformed: Deification in Paul's Soteriology* (berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012);
- (7) Norman Russell's *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2004);
- (8) Philip Cary's *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000);
- (9) Ineke van 't Spijker's *Fictions of the Inner Life: Religious Literature and Formation of the Self in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2004);
- (10) A. N. Williams' *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999);
- (11) Bernhard Blankenhorn's *The Mystery of Union with God: Dionysian Mysticism in Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic U of America P, 2015);
- (12) Daria Spezzano's *The Glory of God's Grace: Deification According to St. Thomas Aquinas* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia P of Ave Maria U, 2015; distributed by Catholic U of America P);
- (13) Denis Renevy's *Language, Self and Love: Hermeneutics in the Writings of Richard Rolle and the Commentaries on the Song of Songs* (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2001);
- (14) Anthony Low's *Aspects of Subjectivity: Society and Individuality from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare and Milton* (Pittsburg: Duquesne UP, 2003);
- (15) Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Revierhead Books/ Penguin Putnam, 1998);
- (16) Katharine Eisaman Maus' *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1995);
- (17) Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse's *The Imaginary Puritan: Literature, Intellectual Labor, and the Origins of Personal Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: U of California P, 1992);
- (18) Dror Wahrman's *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2004);
- (19) David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1950);
- (20) Larry Siedentop's *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap P/Harvard UP, 2014).

But enough examples of works on the theme of the inward turn of consciousness in Western culture that can be related to Ong's discussion of the inward turn of consciousness in Western culture!



Now, because the above seven themes that Ong discusses in *Orality and Literacy* and elsewhere in his extensive body of work have been further delineated by recent scholarly work, what else can be involved in the reluctance of other people such as Rice to accept and endorse Ong's sweeping relationist thesis about Western cultural history? For example, is his way of relating and connecting certain manifestations possibly a stumbling block for other people such as Rice?

For further discussion of Ong's thought, see my article "The West Versus the Rest: Getting Our Cultural Bearings from Walter J. Ong" in the journal *Explorations in Media Ecology*, volume 7, number 4 (2008): pp. 271-82.